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An open letter to Ben Bradlee

Dear Ben:

Interesting story you had on page one of The Washington Post recently, the one headlined: "Document Describes How U.S. 'Blocked' A Contadora Treaty." This story said that it was based on what was described as "a secret background paper" marked "secret/sensitive," a paper "prepared for a National Security Council meeting" which the president is said to have attended.

So, what's interesting about this? Glad you asked. What's interesting is that on May 24 of this year, you wrote Attorney General William French Smith a letter expressing your concern about an "apparent national security violation" allegedly committed by Sen. Jesse Helms when he revealed that the CIA "had bought the election in El Salvador for Duarte." The senator denies any such security breach, but the purpose of this letter is certainly not to suggest that you be deterred by anything as trivial as the truth.

In your letter to Mr. Smith you wrote: "I have long had an interest in national security violations, as you must imagine. For more than 20 years in this city I have watched various people in the White House and in the Pentagon and in the State Department and in your office do battle with journalists and others on this subject.

"I am now trying to remember an apparent national security violation as significant as the recent revelation by Sen. Jesse Helms that the CIA had bought the election in El Salvador for [Jose Napoleon] Duarte."

"I wonder if you know of any in your time in this town. Your answer could be off-the-record, if you wish, although I would obviously prefer it on the record."

When Mr. Smith wrote back and completely ignored your specific question, you had some fun by running the texts of your letter and his under the headline: "Perfectly Clear? Smith 'responds on Helms' 'leak.'"

But, I wonder, Ben: If you're really interested, and apparently concerned, about national security violations, why are you quoting a "secret/sensitive" NSC document on your front page? Isn't this revelation at least as significant, or possibly more so, than what you accused Mr. Helms of doing?

And furthermore, Ben, I wonder: Aren't you leading with your chin on this entire issue? After all, you're the guy who in your 1975 book, "Conversations With Kennedy," told how you were allowed to use secret FBI files to knock down a story about JFK and a hidden divorce in his past. Remember?

In your book you told how, as a Newsweek reporter in the early 1960s, you told presidential press secretary Pierre Salinger that you would need some "solid FBI documentation" to refute the JFK/divorce story. You wrote:

"A couple of days later, Salinger called me with the following proposition: If I agreed to show the president the finished story, and if I got my tail up to Newport [R.I.] where he was vacationing, he would deliver a package of relevant FBI documents to a motel and let me have them for a period not to exceed 24 hours. It was specifically understood that I was not to Xerox anything in the FBI files . . . and that in case of a lawsuit, I would not be given access to these files a second time."

You say that you and Newsweek White House reporter Chuck Roberts "stayed up all night long, first reading everything in the files, then writing the story." The next morning, "as planned," you say you took your finished story to where the Kennedys were vacationing, "returned the FBI files to Salinger, and got the president's OK." Your presidentially approved story subsequently appeared in Newsweek.

Then, years later, Ben, you appeared on an ABC hatchet-job on former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, in which you told us, with a straight face, that you "turned down" an aide of Mr. Hoover's who had once offered you transcripts of secret FBI tapes which supposedly revealed that Martin Luther King had a very active sex life with women not his wife. When I called and asked you why, you told me — and this was a real thigh-slapper: "[Because] it offended me, my sensibilities and ethics. I felt manipulated in an offensive sense."

I guess what I'm trying to ask you, Ben, is a rhetorical question, and it is: On this secret government information bit, aren't you really a phony, a hypocrite? And the answer is: Of course you are. But you're not fooling me. And I suspect you're also not fooling a lot of other people.

Footnote: The FBI tells me it will not — under the Freedom of Information Act — give me copies of any documents, or even confirm there are such documents, pertaining to your use of the bureau's files in the early 1960s unless you say it's okay, Ben. The FBI says to do otherwise would violate the Privacy Act. I've written you a couple of times seeking this permission, but you neither acknowledge nor answer my letters. Why? What have you got to hide? Whatever happened to the people's right to know, Ben?

Best regards,
John Lofton

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